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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Another week, another dollar. Well, that's how the saying goes. Another blast of snow and cold, but that's about to change shortly. Short range forecast for this area is temperatures in the 60s, perhaps 70s next week! I'm really looking forward to it. I can't wait to get outside, including getting out on the golf course. Going to that annual golf expo last weekend just strengthened my urge to get out! Yep, the days are getting longer and longer. Hey, ready for DST this weekend? Yes, it's three weeks early this year.

Although it hasn't been reported as such - well, at least as much as the predicted Y2K changes, this new earlier switch to DST could wreak some havoc on devices such as your computer, cell phones, etc. I keep hearing about patches and things to avoid any issues, but I haven't seen anything online to back that up. So, I'm really not going to worry about it too much personally. Like any other DST change, if I have to manually reset any devices with a clock in it, then that's what I'll do! However, one factor that we'll have to watch out for is what will happen with these devices in three weeks, the "regularly" scheduled time for the switch. Will computer clocks change again? And our other devices? Technology is a wonderful thing, but when we tend to rely too heavily on minor details, we tend to get a little complacent about them.

Well, I don't own anything earth-shattering that a change in time will make much of a difference; at least one I can't rectify easily enough. All that I'm really going to care about is another extra hour of daylight. And, of course I'm looking forward to the warmer temperatures. I even looked out on our patio and noticed that most of the snow is gone from it - time to get the barbecue ready for the steaks!!

Well, before I start to salivate, I had better end this now. Just remember - set your clocks, etc. one hour forward Saturday night, and lose that hour of sleep!

Until next time...

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Here is the current Atari BBS list as of 3/7/2007.. something to add to
to your next newsletter!!

The Boot Factory

WEB: http://bf.amfband.com
A8bit BBS: telnet://bfbbs.no-ip.com
or: telnet://bfbbs.dtdns.net

Inside The 8-bit - (2 lines)
telnet://TCPIPExpress.dyndns.org:8888
:8889
expresspro.dyndns.org 8888

MouseNet BBS
telnet://atari-bbs.kicks-ass.net

Dark Force BBS (Run on a Mega 2 ST)
telnet://darkforce-bbs.dyndns.org

ST Guild BBS
stguild-bbs.dyndns.org

Closer to Home BBS
cth.dtdns.net

Plus there are two chat locations

telnet://irc.atarichat.net
(Enter "atari" at login, skip the password (enter), and then enter
a name.. will take you straight to the IRC chat.)
Usually somethere there most of the time.

telnet://www.atarinews.org
(Enter in this order... "bbs", "Bbs", enter name and password at the
next login, enter, t for talk, c for chat, then a name and you're in)
Chat times 7:00 PM CST Tuesday nights
10:00 am CST Sunday (EuroChat)

Hope to see you out there!

Greg / Doc Clu

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->A-ONE User Group Notes! - Meetings, Shows, and Info!
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The CCAG 2007 Show is Coming Soon!

Buy, sell, trade, play, and see classic video games, computers,
peripherals, memorabilia, and more at the Classic Computing and Gaming Show
(CCAG) on May 26, 2007 at the American Legion Hall--Clifton Post, 22001

Brookpark Rd, Fairview Park, OH from 2:00 PM - 6:00 PM. Vendors, clubs, and collectors will be displaying and selling their retrogaming and retrocomputing goods, from Pong and Atari to Nintendo, Apple and IBM to Commodore and everything in between with many set up for you to play with and explore. We have 4000+ square feet of space. Help us fill it all up!

For more information please go to http://www.ccagshow.com/

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. First off, I've got no good news on employment to share with you. It's taken me a lot more time to put together a resume than I thought it would, and now I'm in the slow, tedious process of getting people who hire people to look at it.

It's funny, but since I'd been steadily employed for almost thirty years, I'd never really thought about keeping a resume current. That's one thing that I think would benefit everyone. Every time you get a promotion or a new responsibility, or take a training course, write that sucker down!

I've gone crazy the past two weeks trying to remember when I took what course, or when I started <such-and-such> responsibility or gotten <whatever> title.

If you do it as-it-happens, you'll have a much easier time should the need for a resume ever arise. I know what you're thinking... "Yeah, but I'm doing okay in my job for right now. And getting the resume into shape a this point is just too much work considering that I'm not looking for a job right now."

Yeah. That's what I thought. Trust me, the job isn't going to get any easier. And, as your mother might have said, "That resume isn't going to write itself!"

Well, enough of that. Oh, if you've got a spare job hanging around for major-league money for doing very little, give me a call, will ya? [grin]

Okay, on to business. I'm not too sure how long the column is going to be this week There are a few more messages this time around than there have been of late, but a lot of them look like either spam/troll-fodder or silly, mean-hearted stuff that no one cares about either way. Let's take a look and see how it turns out, huh?

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup
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’Aly’ asks around about a double-sided floppy drive:

"Would anyone have an Atari SF-314 DSDD drive collecting dust and wish to sell it?"

David Wade tells Aly:

"I don’t have an atari original, but I do have an external DSDD drive in case with PSU. Comes complete with free Mega ST2 with SSDD drive built in. Seriously let me know if its of interest and I’ll test it."

Aly replies:

"Erm, now how long has it taken me to reply...

I’ve just bought an original ST, pre STF/M. I have a ST314 drive I bought ages back but it’s kind of a bit dead.

That Mega of yours. I’m sure they were never fitted with SSDD?? Might be wrong."

Dave replies:

"I gather from the guy I bought it off it was a very early one, and that he installed the blitter later. I guess it might have a DSDD drive and he just bought this so he had two. However I also have a couple of "home brew" external units that have 3.5" & 5" switchable drives, so its not a real loss."

For a couple of weeks now, there’s been a message thread about add-ons that people would want. ’PPera’ carries on a conversation about one of the offshoots of the conversation, a mass storage interface for the cartridge port:

"Such interface is already made for ST, and is called Paskud. As I know it is not available anymore (except second-hand).

Do people still want such a thing or prefer ACSI port based interface?

Some arguments: Cartridge interface can load driver from it’s ROM chips, so no need to boot from hard disk - and it means that it can read DOS disks without loading special driver from floppy.

It can be very fast - faster than ACSI solutions - up to 1.5 MBytes/sec in read and in write (yes). Due to hardware L/H byteswap it will read DOS disks and CD/DVD at same speed as Atari partitions (IDE interface reads CDs slowly).

There is space for some additional short utils in cartridge ROM - may put there some Timeset and other utilities.

Counter-argument may be: won’t work with ’regular’ drivers such as HDDRIVER, AHDI. It needs its own driver and partitioning SW. Or may do partitioning on some PC... (latest is not contra argument in most cases)

Of course Cartridge interface means that no need to do any mods in ST. Just attach and run."

Uwe Seimet replies about an interface of this type not working with HDDriver or AHDI:

"Not necessarily. Writing a SCSI driver plugin (the SCSI driver documentation is also available in English if I am not mistaken) ensures that:

1. It automatically works with HDDRIVER and any other software that profits from SCSI driver support
2. No special partitioning software is required due to 1.

So writing a SCSI driver plugin instead of some other driver is the most flexible solution. The SCSI driver for the Milan's SCSI bus is a good example for the benefits provided by this solution."

'PPera' replies to Uwe:

"Well, I have my driver for standard AHDI IDE IF. It needs just small modifications. In any case, for me it is easier than starting with some plug-in.

Another thing is speed - plugin will certainly work slower than direct solution. Hddriver is pretty fast, no doubt, but access time is not too good with it - it adds whole millisecond to sector access. It may sound as bad joke, but in era of cheap Flash cards access time is really good (under 1ms). Actually access+reading of 1 sector time."

Uwe replies:

"No, it will not be slower. Regardless of the media you are reading from or writing to one or two subroutine calls (and even much more) do not result in any measurable loss of speed. The actual I/O is always the limiting factor.

You do not have control anyway over the applications which are reading or writing the data. The time most applications (even if they are well optimized) need to prepare the data to be written is much more important than the question whether the driver writing the data needs one or two subroutine calls.

One millisecond is a lot for a CPU, and I doubt any driver will waste this much time. Drivers do not need milliseconds to do their work, unless a hardware protocol forces them to wait."

Our good friend Hallvard Tangeraas posts his own idea for a 'must have' ST add-on:

"I'm surprised nobody has suggested a battery-backed realtime clock for the ST. Why Atari left this out to begin with can only be described as a design flaw.

When I used an STe I bought a clock board which IIRC plugged into one of the ROM sockets and possibly also soldered a wire or two to the

motherboard somewhere. I believe Hard & Soft in Germany made them.

With my Mega STe however the clock came built-in, so Atari must have learnt something along the way.

In conclusion I think a clock-board would be of benefit to just about every Atari ST owner out there (who likes to set the clock every time they boot up the machine?).

There have been some DIY projects for this here and there, but not really a complete and fully documented project."

"MT" tells Hallvard:

"On my 1040 STf I had an external clock which plugged into the rom cartridge port. It was called "Forget-Me-Clock II" and worked in combination with a little AUTO folder program. Worked fine, except that the software had Y2K bug... Which I fixed with another AUTO folder program."

Hallvard replies:

"Yeah, I know about those cartridge based clocks, but I'm not particularly fond of things that plug in there as it's a mechanically/electrically bad solution, meaning that you might end up with a "forget me not" clock instead. Every now and then members of my Notator mailing list complain about the program crashing etc. and in just about all the cases it turns out that the copy-protection dongle that goes into the cartridge port has either oxidized or gotten dirt on the contacts, or I believe in some cases the electrical contact is bad because of bent pins.

Such a solution also means that you're not very likely to put anything else in the cartridge port (unless you want a long chain of devices such as in my case with 4 cartridge devices!).

It's been a while since I had a look inside my STe, but IIRC it was a pretty simple circuit, basically with a single clock chip (by Ricoh?) and perhaps a resistor and capacitor, and of course the battery. Mine came with a battery holder for 2x AA batteries, but I thought that seemed a bit old fashioned and clumsy, so I etched a PCB and soldered in a holder for a 3V clock battery instead (no pun intended).
I think something like that could easily be made by someone into DIY electronics, and probably sold quite a few -at least to those who use their Ataris daily, or want to date-stamp their files correctly.
The only downside for a lot of people is that they need to take their STs apart, and in some cases might even need to unsolder the TOS ROMs if they're not socketed (alternatively solder the clock PCB's socket on top of the TOS ROM chip).

For those who can't do that kind of stuff themselves they could have someone into electronics locally do it for them. Shouldn't be hard.

Perhaps an idea for those who are designing and selling add-on hardware for the ST?"

Jean-Luc Ceccoli tells Hallvard:

"If I remember correctly, all Mega models had built-in battery-backed clocks."

Ronald Hall counts ’em off:

"Yep, my Mega ST4 certainly does. :)

So Atari got that part right with:

Mega ST
TT030
Mega STe
Falcon

but left out all the others...I can understand the original 520s and 1040s, but everything after the Mega ST started it, should have had it as well. Just my humble opinion."

Fred Horvat asks about networking under MagiCMac:

"I have the bug to start messing around with my Atari software again. I don’t have the space at the moment to setup my TT so this leaves me with emulation on my Mac. Years ago I ran MagiCMac 1.2.5 on a PowerBook 165 and life was good. I still have MagiCMac 1.2.5 but that only runs under Mac OSX 7.X and I have OS 9.22 and OSX 10.4.8 running on my G4 Cube. I run OSX 98% of the time on it. I downloaded the OS9 and OSX demos of MagiCMac and have each one running OK on my machine. Stinks that they only run for 15 minutes before terminating but it is at least giving me a feel of how each runs on my machine and MagiC really runs great so far. I remember reading years ago about MagiCMac under OS9 being able to use the Mac’s built in TCP/IP stack and Ethernet card. This allowed Cab, FTP programs E-mail, Chat, or whatever to use the Mac’s high speed Internet connection. Problem is I have not been able to find any documentation or configuration files on how to do this. It may be something very simple and obvious in the MagiCMac setup but since the demos and included documentation are in German I have not been able to figure it out. Does anyone know how to configure MagiCMac to use Mac OS TCP/IP and network card? If I can get it working under the demo version then I would be more inclined to spend the money to get the real deal.

When researching how to do this I ran across some statements on the Web that ARAnyM claims to be able to do this also. I have not tried ARAnyM in many years and I did not recall this feature back then. Is this built in and automatic or is there anything special that needs to be done to get to be able to use your host OS networking under ARAnyM?...

Well today I stumbled upon this: ASH sold/supplied(?) a program called MACSTIP that does what I am after. Google/Yahoo/favorite search engines turn up almost nothing at all about this program. I’ve never heard about this program before as I am sure most of you have not either unless you were a MagiCMac user when it was released and you actually used it.

Also I read bits and pieces translated from German or French about a program called ICAT that sounds like it may do the same thing. I have a web page translated on this printed out and will have to study it

closer to see if in fact this will do what I am after."

Derryck Croker tells Fred:

"IIRC Andreas Kromke mentioned that an XCMD module would have to be written to allow this.

I see that I have translations of some of the docs that came with MagicMacX - I must get these online at some point."

Well folks, that’s it for this time around. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week’s Gaming Section - Motorstorm Delivers Brutal Experience!
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" "Gears of War" Best Game!
Sony To Show "Home"!
And much more!

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->A-ONE’s Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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MotorStorm Delivers the Ultimate Brutal Off-Road Racing Experience

Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc. announced the North American release of MotorStorm, available exclusively for the PlayStation 3 (PS3) computer entertainment system. Developed by Evolution Studios, the acclaimed development team renowned for their World Rally Championship WRC) game series, MotorStorm introduces players to an alternative and extreme off-road racing festival where the only rule is to take out the competition and win at all costs.

Recently launched in Japan, MotorStorm has incorporated numerous graphical and gameplay enhancements for the North American version, including the addition of a 12-player online mode. The game also features innovations such as real-time track deformation, where ruts in the track will remain and cause each lap to be different, an aggressive artificial intelligence (A.I.) system that scales to the player’s abilities, and spectacular crash sequences that take full advantage of the PS3 hardware, making MotorStorm one of the most anticipated next-generation games available.

"MotorStorm showcases the power and technology of the PS3 with its combination of next-generation online and offline gameplay functionality and life-like A.I.," said Jeff Reese, Director, Software Marketing, Sony Computer Entertainment America. "With over-the-top action, cinematic crashes, and exhilarating gameplay, consumer anticipation for the game has been overwhelming. Not only do we expect thrill seekers to enhance their PS3 library with MotorStorm, we believe the game will ultimately draw more consumers to the PS3."

In MotorStorm, players descend upon the badlands of Monument Valley for the MotorStorm Festival to celebrate an alternative racing culture. The festival is highlighted by a no-holds-barred off-road race with aggressive and competitive opponents all gunning for the championship title. Players will cut through mud paths, speed over sand dunes, and launch across rocky cliffs in an extreme race to the finish line, all of which is underscored by a rocking soundtrack. The competition is fierce and it’s a survival of the fittest with MotorStorm’s combat-like racing. The physics-based car damage feature heightens the challenge, allowing for any of the seven vehicle types to break and destroy parts upon collisions with other racers. A real-time track deformation function has been implemented so that after each lap raced the terrain will look and handle differently, ensuring players will never face the same lap twice.

Harnessing the power of the PS3, MotorStorm features remarkable player-centric A.I. that reacts to numerous situations within the game, such as realistically reacting to player taunts, seeking out the best routes based on vehicle type used, and changing the level of driving aggression due to player actions. The advanced cinematic effects such as motion-blur and slow motion Hollywood style "crash cams" make wiping out in your vehicle nearly more exciting than finishing the lap.

Featuring a compilation of tracks from some of the most popular rock bands, the MotorStorm in-game soundtrack accentuates the game’s brutal off-road mayhem, providing players the ideal background music to get in the mood for complete destruction and cutthroat competition. The soundtrack features heart-pounding rock anthems sure to raise the game’s intensity level by artists such as Primal Scream, Queens of the Stone Age, Nirvana, Slipknot, and more.

MotorStorm gained critical acclaim at the 2006 E3 show, earning IGN’s 2006 E3 award for "Best Racing Game" and GameSpot’s Editor’s Choice Award for "Best Racing Game." The game also earned 1UP’s "Best of Show" award from TGS 2006.

The independent Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) rates MotorStorm "T" for "Teen" (Descriptors: Language, Violence).

Video Game Makers Name "Gears of War" Best Game

Epic Games and Microsoft Game Studios’ alien shooting video game "Gears of War" on Wednesday took home three honors at the Game Developers Choice Awards, winning best game as well as awards for technology and visual arts.

Other top winners chosen by game makers were Clover Studio and Capcom Entertainment’s nature-adventure game "Okami," which won awards for

character design and innovation, and Nintendo Co. Ltd.’s "Wii Sports," taking home prizes for game design and innovation.

Separately, Bit Blot’s underwater adventure game "Aquaria" took home the $20,000 Seumas McNally Grand Prize for Best Independent Game, at the 2007 Independent Games Festival Awards.

All winners were announced at the Game Developers Conference in San Francisco.

Future Of Play Focus Of Video Game Maker Gathering

Video game makers from around the world will gather in San Francisco beginning on Monday to collaborate about the future of play.

The 20th annual Game Developers Conference (GDC) is the largest gathering of its kind and is dedicated to the "art, science, and business of games," according to its organizers at CMP Technology firm.

Among its features will be lessons in designing games for Nintendo’s popular new Wii video game console with motion-sensitive controllers.

Casual and "serious" games summits will kick-off the weeklong gathering that is expected to draw more than 12,500 people involved in creating or publishing video games.

Casual games are based on non-violent strategy, wordplay, puzzles or classic board games as opposed to warfare, car racing or other action.

"The casual game market has grown to be an integral part of the video game industry, making gamers out of anyone with a PC (personal computer), a mobile phone or an iPod," said conference manager Meggan Scavio.

Serious games are those in which the main motivations are along the lines of teaching, healing or therapy instead of purely entertainment and profit, according to RealTime Associates president David Warhol.

The Southern California company created a Re-Mission game that improves the outlooks of children with cancer and gets them to adhere to treatment programs.

Warhol will present conference goers with insights into RealTime’s new Cool School computer game designed to teach young children to peacefully resolve conflicts ranging from bullies to classmates cutting in lines.

US government funding for the game was inspired by the 1999 Columbine High School massacre in which two students went on a deadly shooting rampage, according to Warhol.

Cool School lets children enter a virtual fantasy school where erasers get into tiffs with chalkboards and balls squabble in the playground.

"It’s not so much a video game as it is an interactive movie," Warhol told AFP. "

"Re-Mission showed that games like this work. The serious game industry is really blossoming."

In Cool School, animated objects get into spats based on typical clashes between children and the players get to choose how to deal with the conflicts.

If a child opts for responses such as "bribery" or "threatening" the scene plays out with predictably undesirable results. If a player selects a "compromise" option the scene has a happier ending.

"It has universal appeal because these kinds of conflicts are universal, you can go to a rural town in China, Japan, France or anywhere and find kids fighting over toys," said developmental psychologist Melanie Killen, a University of Maryland professor who spent years helping craft the games content.

"It focuses on kids in their world. Ideally, you'd love to have teachers spend an hour a day on social skills, but pragmatically, they have negative two minutes of time for it."

A challenge facing serious games is a lack of funding from private publishers that routinely spurn educational or therapeutic games in favor of violence-oriented titles such as Grand Theft Auto, Killen said.

In the Grand Theft Auto video game, points are scored for acts such as stealing cars or killing prostitutes and police officers.

"Serious games are wonderful, but it is an uphill battle," said Killen, who told of a fruitless quest to get private backing for Cool School.

"People have got the idea that blood and gore and sexually explicit images are what sell. I think that is a false assumption. If given the chance, parents would buy high-quality serious games for their children instead."

With continued backing from the US Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, Cool School will begin a pilot program in a school district in the state of Illinois on Monday, Warhol said.

Cool School will need private support to build a website capable of taking the game live online for free play by anyone, according to Warhol.

France-based Game Connection will spend two days applying its "matchmaking" skills to video game creators and publishers and venture capitalists that pay to get promising titles into the market.

Game Connection orchestrates rapid-fire meetings between the parties in a business version of "speed dating," company spokesman David Tractenberg told AFP.

Sony To Show "Home," Ends Wait On PS3 Web Strategy

Sony Corp. will unveil on Wednesday "Home," an online network for its new PlayStation 3, which supports streaming video and advertising and will host virtual characters in common areas and private rooms.

Sony also will preview "LittleBigPlanet" - a game where users play, create and share what they build with other worldwide PS3 users - at the Game Developers Conference this week in San Francisco.

Sony’s PS3 is locked in a battle with Microsoft Corp.’s Xbox 360 and Nintendo Co. Ltd.’s Wii.

"Home," a free download, will be available globally beginning in fall 2007.

A full-featured sample of "LittleBigPlanet" is slated for release on the PlayStation Network this fall, with a full version expected in early 2008. Game pricing will be announced at a later date.

Sony’s new projects, incorporate elements from a crop of innovative Web sites, including Second Life, a virtual reality site where players create and own content, from representations of themselves to homes and businesses; Google Inc.’s video-sharing site YouTube; and News Corp.’s MySpace, a wildly popular site where users create profiles and share everything from music to photos.

"It will take the industry forward," Phil Harrison, President, Worldwide Studios, Sony Computer Entertainment, told Reuters ahead of the launch.

Sam Kennedy, editor-in-chief of Ziff Davis Media Inc.’s 1UP.com video game site, said the projects end many months of waiting for Sony’s online strategy and show the Japanese electronics giant has been on top of advances in online software and services.

"What it tells me is that they’re clearly paying attention. I’m glad to see that side of Sony," Kennedy said.

He added that he was intrigued by functions in "LittleBigPlanet" that allow gamers to make their own games to share with friends.

"This is like game development for everybody," he said.

Jeff Minter Keynotes Independent Games Summit

The Independent Games Summit started off slowly as Jeff Minter apologized for being more used to speaking to machines than people. Few in the capacity room minded as Minter’s love for independent game development shown clearly.

Minter dwelled on many of his past games, including Gridrunner and Attack of the Mutant Camels. He showed both the European version of the latter as well as what Americans knew as AMC, but actually just a version of Gridrunner.

Minter commented that American publishers at this time "were going to follow the herd, and the herd didn’t include any of my beasties."

Minter showed some of his early attempts at music visualizations, sans audio. Small programs for Atari 800 and Commodore 64 were originally intended to be "played" alongside a separate music system. From here, Minter moved onto music visualization, this time with music actually driving the system, played on the Atari Jaguar and later the Xbox 360. "I can’t do this stuff where you write your design spec first," said Minter. "It’s the feeling I’m going for when I’m making a game these days... there don’t even have to be any animals in it anymore!"

He then launched Space Giraffe and played it for the audience, while he described its gameplay as well as some of how it was developed. "First thing's first: Space Giraffe is not Tempest," he stated. "You can play this like Tempest, but you'll wonder why you don't get a good score."

Minter demonstrated playing the level in a Tempest manner, followed by playing the level by properly using the Bull attack, giving him a score ten times higher. Other enemies unique to the game include feedback monsters that cause he whole level to pulse and flare, as well as enemies that would spin the level around.

Like many of Minter's past games, Space Giraffe is not an overly difficult game to complete, in contrast to many of the games his projects seem to be inspired by. You'll always make progress in Space Giraffe, said Minter, even as you die repeatedly.

Throughout, the audience enjoyed Minter's bluntness in describing his experience as an employee for various companies as well as the humor so readily apparent in his games. "A lot of games take themselves too seriously these days," said Minter, himself seeming to be captivated by his own game as he attempted to balance answering audience questions with playing levels like "Flumm Ox" and "Back At The Orifice."

He concluded on the concept that abstract games-as-art would approach the mainstream, taking a jab at the world's biggest publisher along the way: "The more we see in this electronic art, as opposed to Electronic Arts, the more space there will be for it".

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Are Your Systems Ready for March 11 Change to DST?

With March 11 less than a week away, U.S. clocks are ticking toward a deadline that demands I.T. professionals apply special patches to avoid a headache that some have likened to the Y2K scare. Daylight Saving Time (DST) will go into effect in the U.S. three weeks ahead of the typical springtime change, starting March 11, 2007.

As the deadline fast approaches, there is concern that the change may confuse computer programs set to automatically handle DST hours, and every computer system is subject to its impacts. On the mild side, minor aggravations such as scheduling and calendar errors could occur. On the dramatic side, there is a risk that organizations that don't patch their networks properly could see mission-critical applications fail.

While users of the most current generations of operating systems, such as Windows Vista, XP, 2003, or Mac OS X, can rest assured that the DST transition will be relatively smooth, Microsoft has not publicly released

a patch for earlier systems such as Windows 2000, which still has a fairly large installed base.

What’s more, UNIX and Linux server environments may have been left unpatched for years. Some industry watchers are comparing the dilemma to the Y2K panic because no one really knows what will happen on March 11 - or on the last Sunday in October when the time changes back again - if the patches aren’t deployed and retained.

"Y2K was the last time that many of these legacy servers had to be updated," said Chris Andrew, vice president of Security Technologies for PatchLink. "While there may not be a huge number of such systems in an organization, they are most likely running many critical business processes, and thus need to be updated with the latest patches."

Though DST is still a few weeks away, industry experts warn not to wait until the last minute to begin assessing networks. I.T. administrators could find an unpleasant surprise if the software patch doesn’t work. If companies begin the process now, DST updates could be part of a regular and routine maintenance rather than a pre-midnight scramble.

One of the most critical DST dangers impacts databases. Databases are dependent on timestamps to manage revision tracking and rollbacks. Servers and their clients must remain in sync to maintain coordination and integrity. User authentication is also time dependent. Timestamps are encoded into validation packets to assure that an intruder is not capturing and reusing authentication keys for nefarious purposes at a later time.

"System administrators rely on accurate system logs to track changes and diagnose problems," said Patrick Zanella, a product manager at Akibia, an independent IT consulting firm that provides technical support for approximately 130,000 mission critical Sun, HP, Compaq and Dell systems at some of the largest organizations in the world. Zanella said incorrect timestamps severely compromise security logs that track the activities of users throughout an enterprise and across the Internet, and likely violate the mandates of Sarbanes-Oxley.

There is good news. According to Scott Chudy, a senior solutions architect at global I.T. service and solutions provider Dimension Data, assessing for DST compliance is a simple task. A review of a system’s current patch listings will indicate whether the system is DST-compliant, he explained.

However, there is also bad news. In most instances a prerequisite patch level is required. This is where it gets complicated.

"For legacy systems that have been left alone, unpatched for years, organizations will be required to bring the system to a relatively current patch level," Chudy explains. "This is very problematic for organizations with mission-critical systems and applications that have no form of redundancy or high availability implemented. In such instances, planning and timing becomes critical."

Developing a detailed patch plan that incorporates application dependencies, a testing plan, and a back-out plan will allow organizations to update systems in a careful, methodical manner. Keeping in mind that the task of managing DST may be handled in different places in a system, experts suggest thoroughly researching the system’s patching requirements provided by software and hardware vendors.

Patches will certainly need to be applied to the operating system, but

there is also hardware that may handle DST in its firmware. The widely used Java environments also require their own patches. What's more, many systems will require reboots to fully implement the changes, so I.T. administrators should be prepared to schedule a maintenance downtime for reboots.

"When executing this plan, be sure to get buy-in from the affected system users and owners to ensure that any downtime required won't interfere with important business functions, such as end of the month payroll," Chudy noted.

Most major vendors are offering DST patches, but I.T. administrators need a solid deployment process. "If you have a thousand servers, you don't want guys walking around with CDs trying to patch each server because you would have to take that same route to unpatch the machines if something goes wrong," said Luis Rodriguez, Tivoli Director of Market Management at IBM. "You need an automated process."

While I.T. administrators at large companies may be comfortable with patch deployments across thousands of servers, it should be noted that the DST patch comes with an additional, critical challenge: retention. The I.T. administrator may test and deploy in time for DST, but if a virus or Trojan enters the system and the computers are reverted to a previous date, then the patch could be lost and the systems jeopardized.

Still, Rodriguez said, there is no reason to panic, even for small- to mid-sized corporations that do not have an articulated patch management process in place. "This stuff is not rocket science, but it is experiential. It's like riding a bike. If you fall down a few times, you just keep trying until you learn," he said. "Some people are so good they can do acrobatics on a bike."

John Venator, president and CEO of the Computing Technology Industry Association (CTIA) offers a few final thoughts and best practices for companies concerned about DST patching. He suggests having I.T. personnel on hand during the DST change so they can repair any problems that arise. These pros should also have well-defined escalation procedures to deal with any negative circumstances, he said.

"Patches will not be available for all products. Some vendors have said that they do not intend to provide patches for products they no longer support," Venator said. "That may require I.T. professionals to configure a fix on their own; or move to a more current version of the product."

Most I.T. vendors, though, have released patches for supported products, or soon will. To learn more, you can visit the DST information pages provided by software and hardware makers, including HP, Cisco, IBM, Microsoft, Red Hat, and Sun Microsystems.

HP's information page points out that Canada and Bermuda will be implementing the same DST changes as in the U.S., and other countries are expected to make similar changes. For a convenient list of Daylight Saving Time schedules around the world, check out the Worldwide Daylight Saving Reference Page.

So Much Data, Relatively Little Space

A new study that estimates how much digital information the world is generating (hint: a lot) finds that for the first time, there's not enough storage space to hold it all. Good thing we delete some stuff.

The report, assembled by the technology research firm IDC, sought to account for all the ones and zeros that make up photos, videos, e-mails, Web pages, instant messages, phone calls and other digital content zipping around. The researchers also assumed that on average, each digital file gets replicated three times.

Add it all up and IDC determined that the world generated 161 billion gigabytes - 161 exabytes - of digital information last year.

Oh, the equivalents! That's like 12 stacks of books that each reach from the Earth to the sun. Or you might think of it as 3 million times the information n all the books ever written, according to IDC. You'd need more than 2 billion of the most capacious iPods on the market to get 161 exabytes.

The previous best estimate came from researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, who totaled the globe's information production at 5 exabytes in 2003.

But that report followed a different trail. It included non-electronic information, such as analog radio broadcasts or printed office memos, and tallied how much space that would consume if digitized. And it counted original data only, not all the times things got copied.

In comparison, the IDC numbers were made much higher by including content as it was created and as it was reproduced, for example, as a digital TV file was made and every time it landed on a screen. If IDC tracked original data only, its result would have been 40 exabytes.

Still, even the 2003 figure of 5 exabytes is enormous - it was said at the time to be 37,000 Libraries of Congress - so why does it matter how much more enormous the number is now?

For one thing, said IDC analyst John Gantz, it's important to understand the effects of the factors behind the information explosion - such as the profusion of surveillance cameras and regulatory rules for corporate data retention.

In fact, the supply of data technically outstrips the supply of places to put it.

IDC estimates that the world had 185 exabytes of storage available last year and will have 601 exabytes in 2010. But the amount of stuff generated is expected to jump from 161 exabytes last year to 988 exabytes (closing in on 1 zettabyte) in 2010.

"If you had a run on the bank, you'd be in trouble," Gantz said. "If everybody stored every digital bit, there wouldn't be enough room."

Fortunately, storage space is not actually scarce and continues to get cheaper. That's because not everything gets warehoused. Not only do e-mails get deleted, but some digital signals are not made to linger, like the contents of phone calls. (Although, who's to say those conversations don't get catalogued someplace, perhaps the National Security Agency? The IDC researchers assumed the answer was no. "I don't want men in black coming to look for me," Gantz joked.)

But even if the IDC findings don’t raise the prospect that disk drives will be virtually bursting at the seams, the study has intriguing implications. Among them: We’ll need better technologies to help secure, parse, find and recover usable material in this universe of data.

Chuck Hollis, vice president of technology alliances at EMC Corp., the data-management company that sponsored the IDC research and the earlier Berkeley studies, said the new report made him wonder whether enough is being done to save the digital data for posterity.

"Someone has to make a decision about what to store and what not," Hollis said. "How do we preserve our heritage? Who’s responsible for keeping all of this stuff around so our kids can look at it, so historians can look at it? t’s not clear."

New Alliance Plans To Tackle Mountains of E-Waste

A new U.N.-led alliance will work out global scrapping guidelines to protect the environment from mountains of electronic trash such as computers, phones and televisions, the group said on Tuesday.

Three U.N. agencies, 16 firms including Microsoft, Hewlett-Packard and Philips, several government bodies and universities said they were teaming up with goals such as more recycling and longer lives for electronic goods.

"There’s an urgent need to harmonize approaches to electronic waste around the world," said Ruediger Kuehr of the U.N. University, who will head a secretariat of the new StEP (Solving the E-waste Problem) project in Bonn, Germany.

He told Reuters that e-waste - such as microwave ovens, batteries, photocopiers or hairdryers - often released toxins if incinerated. Older gadgets contain poisonous chemicals such as dioxins or PCBs or heavy metals such as mercury or cadmium.

Some products contain valuable gold and platinum or more exotic indium, used in flat-screen televisions, or ruthenium , used in resistors. Prices of indium, for instance, have surged to $725 a kilo from $70 in 2002.

Electronic and electrical waste is among the fastest-growing types of trash in the world and is likely soon to reach 40 million metric tons a year, or enough to fill a line of dump trucks stretching half way round the world, StEP said.

StEP would run several projects in coming years, likely to cost millions of dollars, to lay down guidelines for scrapping gadgets, building on national legislation from places such as Japan, the European Union and the United States.

It would encourage companies to make products that last longer and shift to make more products with components that can be upgraded, rather than dumped. The Secretariat, with three full-time staff, will contract out most of the work.

In the end, the alliance aims to develop a StEP logo for companies to put

on their products to show that scrapping processes conform to international guidelines.

"Consumers will benefit through knowing what to do with their obsolete machines, less pollution and longer-lasting electronic equipment," Hans van Ginkel, the head of the U.N. University, said in a statement.

"Companies involved in StEP will benefit through globally standardized, safe and environmentally-proven processes for disposal, reduction or reuse and recycling of e-scrap," he said.

He said the new guidelines would not push up prices, and product costs could even fall with streamlined global rules.

Many products already include costs of disposal. A 2005 directive in the European Union, for instance, requires electronics makers to set up recycling and disposal systems.

But many countries have no rules, especially in developing nations where much obsolete equipment ends up dumped.

Best Buy Web Site Pricing Probed

Best Buy is under investigation by Connecticut’s attorney general after consumers complained they were denied deals found at the electronic retailer’s Web site by store employees who pulled up a lookalike site that listed higher prices on some merchandise.

"The key question is whether consumers were advertised one price, and then denied that price when they got to the store," Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal said Tuesday.

Blumenthal said his office received at least 20 complaints after a columnist for The Hartford Courant reported the experience of one Connecticut man who found a laptop computer advertised for $729.99 on BestBuy.com, then went to a Best Buy store where an employee who seemed to check the same Web site told him the price was actually $879.99.

Dawn Bryant, spokeswoman for the Richfield-headquartered retailer, confirmed that store employees have access to an internal Web site that looks nearly identical to the public BestBuy.com site. But she said company policy is to always offer customers the lowest quoted price, unless it’s specifically identified as a deal available only to online shoppers.

"It’s unfortunate, some of the situations being described," Bryant said. "What we’ve learned very quickly is we have not been clear enough in communicating to our employees the policy, and how to execute it in our stores."

"There is not and never has been an intent to mislead our customers, period," Bryant said.

Bryant said discrepancies between prices on BestBuy.com and the internal Web site can be attributed to market factors at individual stores. "The prices at BestBuy.com are national prices," she said.

The similarity in appearance between BestBuy.com and the internal Web site "made sense at the time," Bryant said. "Is it time to revisit it? Very likely."

Blumenthal said if his office uncovers any intentional wrongdoing, penalties could include fines or restitution to customers, among other options. Bryant said the company is cooperating with the investigation.

Bryant said Connecticut is the only state that has contacted Best Buy about the Web site issue. But she said consumers from around the country began contacting the company with similar stories after the case there drew publicity. She said addressing those concerns would be part of the company's overall response.

Best Buy Co. is the nation's largest retailer of consumer electronics.

US Authorities Target Mass E-mail Stock Scam

US stock market regulators suspended trade in 35 small companies Thursday due to a fraudulent campaign of mass e-mails, or "spam," that hyped the firms' shares to investors, officials said.

The Securities and Exchange Commission said it had acted, issuing its highest number of suspensions ever related to mass e-mailing known as spamming, to protect unsuspecting investors from likely fraud.

"This morning the Securities and Exchange Commission struck a blow for investors and for every American with a computer against one of the worst menaces of the information age," SEC chairman Christopher Cox told reporters at a news conference at the regulator's headquarters.

The suspensions under "Operation Spamalot" are part of an increased bid by the SEC, America's top market regulator, to aggressively tackle spam e-mail campaigns that tout a company's stock by falsely claiming a major new oil discovery or a new product launch.

Officials said that even SEC staffers had received the widely distributed e-mails, despite spam-blocking software programs, which they said had netted perpetrations millions of dollars in ill-gotten gains.

Cox said the SEC was vying to bring those behind the e-mails to account and that the agency was working with foreign regulators as such communications often crossed international borders.

Due to technological advances, spammers can be based offshore, in a different country or even on the other side of the world, but can fire off thousands of spam e-mails with the click of a computer key.

The SEC estimates that some 100 million spam messages touting stocks are e-mailed en masse every week, sometimes triggering dramatic spikes in share prices and trading volumes.

The actions aim to protect investors from potentially fraudulent spam e-mails hyping small stocks. The e-mails seek to dupe investors with phrases like, "Ready to Explode," "Ride the Bull," and "Fast Money," according to the SEC statement.

Regulators said unwary investors may trade on such spam e-mails believing a company’s stock is set to spike, but said that they could in fact lose their shirts as such e-mail-based claims are often false.

Some of the 35 small stocks suspended include America Asia Petroleum Corp., Equitable Mining Corp., Koko Petroleum Corp., Biogenerics Ltd., National Healthcare Logistics, Relay Capital Corp., and Sports-stuff.com Inc.

One such spam e-mail sent to AFP Thursday urged investors to buy stock in Cambridge Resources Corp, saying "hot news keeps CBRP on the go!"

It was not clear from the e-mail what the supposed "hot news" was and SEC officials warned investors about the perils of such anonymous messages.

"Never buy stock based on an e-mail from someone you don’t know. We urge investors to do their homework before investing in any company," SEC enforcement director Linda Thomsen cautioned.

An SEC spokesman said the agency’s probe was ongoing in a bid to uncover who was behind the mass e-mail campaigns.

The trading suspensions will last for 10 days. The companies involved are not listed on any US exchange, but are priced by brokers on the Pink Sheets quotation service.

Adult Spam Down, Image Spam Climbs

Pornographic spam dropped to an all-time low in February, as spammers concentrated on health-related products and other general product pitches, according to a report from vendor Symantec Corp.

And similar to software, spam is also increasingly being localized. The Symantec report on spam also said that there was a rise in gambling-related spam in German, Italian and French, while previously it was only mostly in English.

Symantec drew the conclusions from its own data, as do many security vendors that publish trend reports based on their own monitoring methods.

Pornographic spam comprised just 3 percent of the total amount of spam last month, the lowest figure ever recorded, Symantec said. Overall, about 70 percent of the e-mail messages monitored by Symantec were spam, half of which originated from computers in North America.

Improvements in blocking and filtering methods have driven spammers to use new techniques to get into inboxes. Some 38 percent of the spam sent in February used images in messages, which makes it more difficult for security software. Messages appear to be more unique, allowing them to bypass a filter.

Spammers also are using text slanted at upward or downward angles. The method hampers optical character recognition technology, which tries to read the text within images, Symantec said.

Wikipedia To Seek Proof of Credentials

Following revelations that a high-ranking member of Wikipedia's bureaucracy used his cloak of anonymity to lie about being a professor of religion, the free Internet encyclopedia plans to ask contributors who claim such credentials to identify themselves.

Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales said in interviews by phone and instant message Wednesday from Japan that contributors still would be able to remain anonymous. But he said they should only be allowed to cite some professional expertise in a subject if those credentials have been verified.

"We always prefer to give a positive incentive rather than absolute prohibition, so that people can contribute without a lot of hassle," Wales wrote.

Wales suggested such a plan two years ago, but the idea suddenly gained currency after the recent discovery that a prolific Wikipedia contributor who wrote under the pen name "Essjay" and claimed to be a professor of theology turned out to be a 24-year-old college dropout, Ryan Jordan.

Jordan's fraud came to light last week when The New Yorker published an editor's note stating that a 2006 Wikipedia profile in the magazine had erroneously described Essjay's purported academic resume. The New Yorker said a Wikipedia higher-up had vouched for Essjay to the author of the piece, Stacy Schiff, but that neither knew Essjay's real identity.

In addition to contributing thousands of articles to the sprawling Web encyclopedia, Jordan had recently been promoted to arbitrator, a position for trusted members of the community. Arbitrators can overrule an edit made by another volunteer or block people who abuse the site.

Jordan also was hired in January by Wikia Inc., a for-profit venture run by Wales. He has since been dismissed.

Jordan has not returned an e-mail seeking comment from The Associated Press. But in a note on his Wikipedia "user page" before it was officially "retired," he apologized for any harm he caused Wikipedia.

"It was, quite honestly, my impression that it was well known that I was not who I claimed to be, and that in the absence of any confirmation, no respectible (sic) publication would print it," he wrote.

Wikipedia is full of anonymous contributors like Essjay, whose user page also once proclaimed: "My Wikipedia motto is 'Lux et Veritas' (Light and Truth) and I believe more individuals should contribute with an intention to bring light to the community and truth to the encyclopedia."

The anonymity of the site is a frequent cause of mischief - from juvenile vandalism of entries to the infamous case involving journalist John Seigenthaler Sr., who was incorrectly described as a suspect in the Kennedy assassinations. And that has raised concerns about the credibility of the site.

But anonymity is also considered one of the main forces behind Wikipedia's astonishing growth, to nearly 1.7 million articles in English and millions more in dozens of other languages. Wales has said he is an anti-credentialist" - because anonymity puts a reader's attention on the

substance of what people have written rather than who they are.

Wales said Wednesday that belief is unchanged. But, he said, if people want to claim expertise on Wikipedia, they ought to be prompted to prove it. If they don’t want to give their real names, they shouldn’t be allowed to tout credentials. Had that policy been in place, Wales said, Jordan probably would not have gotten away with claiming a Ph.D. in religion.

"It’s always inappropriate to try to win an argument by flashing your credentials," Wales said, "and even more so if those credentials are inaccurate."

MySpace Age Verification Bill Proposed

Social-networking sites have become an integral part of life for most teens, with talk of collecting friends and tweaking profile pages peppering chatter both online and off. But if a Connecticut lawmaker has his way, access to the sites by underage users would require parental consent.

Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal is urging sites such as MySpace and Xanga to require age verification and parental consent before allowing minors to post profiles. Blumenthal is helping lead a coalition of 44 states asking MySpace and its parent company, News Corp., to institute age verification in the hope of shielding minors from sexual predators.

His proposed legislation comes a day after a 23-year-old man was sentenced to 14 years in prison for using Myspace to arrange sexual contact with an 11-year-old Connecticut girl. In Connecticut, at least six alleged sexual assaults involving older men and underage girls have been tied to MySpace in the last year.

"Failing to verify ages means that children are exposed to sexual predators who may be older men lying to seem younger," Blumenthal said in a statement. "There is no excuse in technology or cost for refusing age verification. If we can put a man on the moon - or invent the Internet - we can reliably check ages."

Under the proposal, sites that fail to verify ages and fail to obtain parental permission to post profiles of users under 18 would face civil penalties of up to $5,000 per violation. The legislation also would allow individuals to bring private lawsuits against the sites. Information about parents would be checked and parents would be contacted directly when necessary.

Hemanshu Nigam, chief security officer at MySpace, said the social-networking site is deeply committed to protecting its teenage users through a combination of offline education and online tools. But he also said that the proposed bill is not the answer.

"We have and will continue to focus considerable resources on developing effective ways to make our site safer," Nigam said in a statement.

MySpace leads the social-networking pack with over 100 million users. The site’s current policy prohibits kids under the age of 14 from creating profiles. But enforcement is tricky. On the site’s terms-of-use page, it

specifies that one’s profile may be deleted and membership terminated without warning if site administrators believe the user is under 14 years of age.

Profiles of the site’s youngest users - ages 14 and 15 - are hidden to people not on the user’s list of friends. Others see just the username, age, location, and gender. But as a young user’s network of friends expands, his or her risk of being contacted by a sexual predator expands as well.

According to the U. S. Department of Justice, one out of every seven kids is solicited for sex online. Because of this, law enforcement agencies and school administrators have warned parents and teens of the risks associated with the social-networking sites.

Blumenthal’s bill, which is supported by endorsed by four other Connecticut lawmakers, is scheduled for a public hearing Thursday.

JPEG Photo Format on Its Way Out?

Microsoft Corp. will soon submit a new photo format to an international standards organization that it says offers higher quality images with better compression, the company said on Thursday.

The format, HD Photo - recently renamed from Windows Media Photo - is taking aim at the JPEG format, a 15-year old technology still widely used in digital cameras and image applications.

Both formats take images and use compression to make the file sizes smaller so more photos can fit on a memory card. During compression, however, the quality of the photo tends to degrade.

Microsoft said HD Photo’s lightweight algorithm causes less damage to photos during compression, with higher-quality images that are half the size of JPEG.

The format can also accommodate "lossless" and "lossy" compression, two methods of compressing photo data with different effects on image quality. Microsoft said adjustments can be made to color balance and exposure settings that won’t discard or truncate data that occurs with other bitmap formats.

Although JPEG is aging, it has been modified to help keep it up to date. The latest JPEG 2000 format features better image quality while also supporting lossless and lossy compression. The original JPEG did only lossy.

Time will tell whether HD Photo can supplant JPEG by gaining the support of printer, camera and application vendors. But Microsoft is supporting the format in products such as its Vista and XP OSes and has already gained an important vendor ally.

In the next two months, Adobe Systems Inc. and Microsoft will release a plug-ins for CS3 and CS2 versions of its widely used Photoshop program for Vista, XP and Apple Inc.’s OS X. Also, Microsoft also has built a HD Photo Device Porting Kit so hardware manufacturers can support it.

Warning: Don’t Spam This Scot

Most people just grumble and hit delete, but when Gordon Dick received a spam message advertising Internet services, he fought back.

The 30-year-old Web marketing specialist from Edinburgh sued the sender, Transcom Internet Services Ltd., in small-claims court. The court ordered the company to pay $1,445 in damages and $1,190 in court costs.

"If someone was throwing stones through your window, would you just ignore it?" Dick said. "It’s anti-social behavior and they shouldn’t be doing it in the first place."

Dick argued that Transcom had taken his e-mail address from an Internet forum without his consent, violating the European Union Data Protection Act.

Transcom director William Smith denied that the message was spam. He said Dick received the mailing last year after his address was accidentally taken from a group e-mail and added to a company database. Smith said the e-mail went to 41,000 people.

Transcom’s lawyers argued damages were unwarranted because the e-mail did not hurt Dick financially. But the court rejected the argument.

Nick Lockett, a London attorney who specializes in Internet law, said the ruling could prompt other cases in which spam recipients seek damages to cover the costs of e-mail filtering software and server space.

Indeed, Dick has set up a Web site offering advice on how to fight spammers in court. So has Nigel Roberts, a Briton who won a 300-pound ($580) settlement in 2005 over spam from a car company and a fax broadcasting business.

"The majority of people," Roberts said, "don’t know how to look at the spam e-mail and identify who sent it."

On the Net:

Scotch Spam: http://scotchspam.org.uk

Spam Legal Action: http://spamlegalaction.pbwiki.com

Three Surfers Find A New Way To Drink - Online

Three U.S. surfing friends whose jobs moved them to different cities have come up with a way to continue their weekly drinking session - in an online pub that even has happy hours.

The founders of CherryTAP claim to have set up the Internet’s first online pub that gives users the nuances of a pub but from the comfort of their home computer or laptop.

"We liked to go after a long day at work to a bar and hang out and have a

few drinks," said Bill Lee, 36, a freelance marketer from San Francisco who was one of the three founders.

"When we moved apart we couldn't do that anymore so we wanted to recreate that online."

Lee said CherryTAP, which now has over 700,000 users in the United States and Britain, was different from other social networking sites as you did not need to have a network of friends already. It also did not take advertising.

Instead CherryTAP has just launched "happy hours," where users pay $100 to sponsor an hour-long session, with their name appearing at the top of the site and other users raising their glasses to toast them.

"Users can give each other virtual drinks and this makes people more comfortable to chat to each other," said Lee who set up the site with friends Mike Headlund, 28, a computer consultant, and kiteboard instructor Ryan Riccitelli, 34.

"The person who sponsors happy hour becomes the most popular person on that site and they get 15 minutes of fame."

Instead of a barman, who in a real pub is often used as a sounding board, users can send in questions which are answered by the community and there is a team of volunteer bouncers to ensure people in the online pub behaved.

"You don't have to drink but it can be an icebreaker. You can give people virtual drinks and get chatting," said Lee.

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